

The Blitzkrieg Revolution

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On War.com

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One of the great lessons to be learned from World War II is that a relatively small change at the tactical level can have a tremendous effect on the strategic situation. Such was the case when the German army introduced mechanized divisions -- the panzer divisions. On a purely technical basis these units were not dissimilar to armored divisions deployed and experimented with in other countries and while these showed some promise they hardly represented a significant deviation from the norm in the armies of the great powers. However, when combined with the "storm troop" tactics developed during the First World War, these mechanized units proved to be the basis for an entirely new form of warfare and a new term entered our vocabulary to describe it -- Blitzkrieg.

Germany solved the problem of static trench warfare by 1918 but it went virtually unnoticed at the time. With American troops flooding onto the Western Front and German troops in full retreat after the spring offensive collapsed, there was not the time to give serious consideration to the effectiveness of the German tactical doctrine by the allied camp. Besides which, the lack of mechanization made the "storm troop" tactics that the German army had developed ineffectual at the strategic level. The mobility necessary to make these tactics work simply did not yet exist.

One reason for the allied victory in World War I was the use of tanks in support of infantry attacks-- a British technological advance. There were other reasons as well, but tanks featured prominently in almost all the explanations. The mechanical limits on early armored fighting vehicles, however, led most military experts to conclude that this new element in land warfare should be relegated to an infantry support role. Visionaries, meanwhile, seized on the tank as a revolutionary weapons system and argued for its massed employment in fully mechanized units instead of the parceling out of armored assets to the infantry units which was the norm for post Great War armies.

In the Soviet Union of the 1930s the idea of fully mechanized armored units was actually adopted for a while as official doctrine. Once the full implications, especially the industrial requirements, of such a doctrine became apparent there was a reversal in official sanction. The kind of fully mechanized army being proposed was simply beyond the capabilities of the Soviet state to provide. A typically Stalinist means of revising doctrine was applied to the Soviet officers who favored the mechanized idea -- the military purge.

In Britain and France the officers who favored mechanized units during the twenties and thirties were too junior to win doctrinal arguments with their respective institutions. The military leadership in both countries retained the Great War perspective that tanks were an infantry support weapon. This should not be seen as an unreasonable position since, after all, this is the use tanks were put to in the First World War and it had proven successful. So, while the seeds of mechanization were everywhere, the soil was not fertile.

Germany's inter-war experience was similar to that of the other great powers although there was a somewhat higher willingness to experiment with new ideas. Tanks were viewed primarily as an infantry support weapon by most of the senior officers. Even the rise of Hitler and his apparent support of mechanized warfare did little to change the generals' point of view. Besides, Hitler's interest in armor was primarily based on its propaganda value and one could argue that the only reason fully mechanized units were encouraged under Hitler was that they looked really impressive on parade. No one expected these units to have a war-winning quality.

When the war began and Poland was eliminated within a month of operations by the Third Reich's army, few military observers showed any concern. There was a complete lack of insight into the strategic implications of this new use of armored units. Only after France was eliminated from the war in six weeks (an accomplishment that had proven impossible in the four years of the First World War) did observers begin to reconsider their assumptions about how wars were to be fought. By then, most of Europe was already under German hegemony. When the Soviet Union was invaded about one year after France had been defeated, their military was still trying to reform in a way that was consistent with the German pattern. Unfortunately, such radical changes take time to institute. This inevitable lag nearly cost the Soviet Union its survival. The territory lost in the first six weeks of Barbarossa took three years to recover and the social and economic damage done was not overcome for decades afterward.

All of the Third Reich's success in the first period of the war can readily be attributed to the remarkably effective combination of mechanized units and "storm troop" tactics. It was a combination that few military experts viewed as revolutionary until after the effects were observed on the battlefield. Once revealed, there was a strict time limit on the German Blitzkrieg's effectiveness because viable countermeasures would inevitably be developed by its enemies. This weakness, rather than the more frequently cited one of lack of economic production, doomed Nazi Germany to defeat if presented with a lengthy war. Its entire success depended on the inability of its enemies to adapt to the new form of war before they were defeated.

Originally published in "World War II" at Suite101.com on November 1, 1998.
Revised edition published in "Articles On War" at OnWar.com on July 1, 2003.